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RESEARCH PROJECT ON AMERICAN FILM

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Kenneth Anger:
The Shape of his Achievement

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To a degree greater than any other prominent independent filmmaker, Kenneth Anger has managed to create a cohesive oeuvre--a body of work in which each individual film plays a clear role as part of a larger structure. At least three basic unifying principles can be identified in his work. The most fundamental organizing factor linking Anger's films is the linear development of his technique and the elaboration of his chosen themes, which reflect the progressive evolution of his sensibility over the course of time. This process underlies the career of any artist, whether he works in cinema or another medium, who deserves the name. Although the role of the artist's personal intellectual and psychological history should not be overlooked in this developmental process, the artist's external social and physical environment also function as crucial shaping forces. Despite the primacy in Anger's films of occult elements and related material dealing with "interior" or "alternate" worlds, his personal travels in the United States and Europe and the cultural history of the past quarter-century cannot be ignored as factors that have helped to determine his creative evolution. In fact, his work might reasonably be divided into phases that correspond to the cities where he has lived, providing two "Los Angeles periods," an intervening "Paris era," and his current "London phase."

Furthermore, Anger, more than any other independent filmmaker (with the possible exception of Andy Warhol) has been part of the social history of his times, thanks to his peripheral--but historically recorded--involvement in phenomena as diverse as the 1967 Pentagon march and l'affaire Manson; this fact has had a definite impact on his career as an artist.

In addition to this basic linear development, Anger's artistic output has been given its distinctive form by the operation of two further architectonic forces, operating presumably on both the conscious and unconscious levels of his sensibility. As I see them, these forces are:

1) A tendency to make each successive film comment upon or extend the formal and thematic elements contained in the film that directly precedes it in time. This process involves more than the simple elaboration of motifs and refinement of techniques, since any two successive films tend to complement one another in a manner that makes them a self-contained pair--a "matched set."

2) A similar, but broader and more complex, drive toward structure which turns individual films into units within groups that might be called "constellations." The aesthetic elements of each film in such a group have a distinct relationship to corresponding elements in the other members of its constellation. These constellations, in turn, are intermediate structures which have their own role to play in the larger unity of Anger's oeuvre as it exists today.

In the remainder of this essay, although I will present some material about the basic linear development of Anger's sensibility and its reflection in his work, my main concern will be with the

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functioning of the two architectonic forces I have described. Specifically, I want to show how these organizational principles bind together Anger's three monochrome films, Fireworks, Eaux d'Artifice, and Rabbit's Moon, into a single "constellation."

Aside from some juvenilia, Fireworks represented Anger's debut as a film-maker. Despite the inevitable rough edges of a miniscule budget, Fireworks has shocked and fascinated audiences continuously since it first appeared in 1947; it is almost certainly the best-known and most frequently exhibited independent film of its vintage. Its very success provided Anger with a creative challenge, since a second film along similar lines would almost certainly suffer by comparison. Part of the solution to this problem was provided by his subsequent move from California to France. The impact of a new locale and cultural atmosphere was bound to provide him with a stimulating new perspective.

The first tangible cinematic result of his new situation (an important false start will be discussed later) was Eaux d'Artifice (1953). This, the second film Anger was to complete in black and white, could be described as a direct antithesis to the key formal and symbolic elements in Fireworks. The title itself is a punning antithesis to feu d'artifice, the French equivalent of the English word "fireworks." Presumably, at this point in his career, Anger simply considered fire and water as "natural opposites" with powerful connotations, but there seems to be an anticipation here of his later interest in astrology and other occult disciplines, in which such polarities carry a heavy load of significance.

The style of Fireworks is marked by jagged, discordant images and rhythms, from the flashes of lightning that illuminate the opening scene down to the mannered, irregular gestures of the protagonist. In striking contrast, Eaux d'Artifice flows from image to image by means of slow dissolves that produce a seamless, fluid effect. In Fireworks the physical setting is always indistinct and often merely suggested by lighting. Hence attention centers on the actors, and particularly on their bodies; economic necessity may be partly responsible for the rugged austerity of the film's images, but the overall effect must be intentional. Eaux d'Artifice, on the other hand, is virtually all setting--the fountains of the Ville d'Este in Tivoli--and the film's sole performer (who appears in roughly half of its total footage) is photographed at such a distance and dressed so elaborately that her age and exact appearance cannot be determined by the viewer. In actuality she was a circus dwarf.

The dominant aesthetic effect of Eaux d'Artifice is produced by the interaction of three levels: the play of the water of the fountains (often photographed in extreme close-up), the baroque sculpture of the fountains themselves, and the music on the soundtrack. The visual and auditory counterpoint between these levels produces a pleasant effect--and one that is distinctly modern for an era in which closely-synchronized scores were still common in commercial films. While many of the film's admirers seem to respond primarily to this formal, or decorative, aspect of Eaux d'Artifice, there is a further, symbolic dimension in the

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work that provides the crucial thematic link to Fireworks. The atmosphere of the Tivoli gardens reflects the stylized, complex eroticism of the civilization that created them (cf. Last Year at Marienbad), particularly from the viewpoint of a young American. Could the gowned and wigged wraith who darts among the "waters of artifice" be considered Anger's Mona Lisa--an image of cryptic femininity to complement the brutal masculinity of the American sailors in Fireworks?

Three years before the release of Eaux d'Artifice Anger had made an abortive attempt at coming to grips with the European scene in cinematic terms. In 1950 he shot some footage of French mimes in an adaption of the legend of Pierrot, the tragic clown. The working title of the film, shot on 35 mm stock, was La Lune des Lapins; this work eventually emerged in 1970 with a rhythm-and-blues sound track and bearing the title Rabbit's Moon. La Lune des Lapins seems to represent the first step in Anger's ongoing quest for a suitable mythology to provide an underpinning for his work, in the way that the Orpheus legend runs through Cocteau's film work. Anger seems to have injected some personal elements in the symbolism of the work, such as the mirror (suggesting self-examination and introspection) and the magic lantern (almost a pun, linking Anger's two great obsessions, cinema and the occult).

Considered without the score that Anger added twenty years later, Rabbit's Moon is a bit stiff and pretentious. The Pierrot motif does not appear to have been entirely congenial to Anger's sensibility, which may account in part for the fact that he did not complete La Lune des Lapins in 1950. In his subsequent work he has tended, like Blake and Yeats, to create an eclectic personal mythology out of a multitude of disparate elements. owever, though it represents a false start, La Lune des Lapins anticipates key aspects of Anger's later output. In particular, the "black" mime who thwarts the hero of La Lune des Lapins marks the first appearance in Anger's work of a distinctive negative figure like those that play key roles in his later films. The mob of sailors in Fireworks performs a similar role, but they are not individually characterized; the sinister clown of Rabbit's Moon is the first of the line of clearly defined anti-heroes that includes "Scorpio" (Bobby Byron) in Scorpio Rising and "Lucifer" (Robert Beausoleil) in Invocation of My Demon Brother.

The finished version of Rabbit's Moon is linked to the larger structure of Anger's work at several points. Anger seems to have adopted the Pierrot legend as his theme in the first place at least partly because its masochistic atmosphere echoes the theme of Fireworks in a European context. Like Eaux d'Artifice, Rabbit's Moon has an intricate visual texture in striking contrast to the bold images of Fireworks. In short, if Anger had completed La Lune des Lapins, the film would have provided the kind of complement to Fireworks, in theme and style, that Eaux d'Artifice eventually presented. As it happened, the film remained uncompleted and presumed lost until 1970. At that point, by adding the rock-and-roll sound-track which converted La Lune des Lapins into Rabbit's Moon, Anger

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both provided the key artistic element that had been missing in the work and also forged a link between the mature style of Scorpio Rising and his early monochrome period. The mocking pop score of Rabbit's Moon, which echoes the soundtracks of both Scorpio Rising and Kustom Kar Kommandos, supplies that element of astringent, ironic humor that is characteristic of Anger's best work.

Recently Anger has taken a further, rather questionable step toward unifying his three monochrome works (which he himself considers a trilogy). In their usual versions Fireworks has been a pure black-and-white film (although a hand-tinted version was once available), whereas Eaux d'Artifice is tinted a pale blue. This emphasizes the polarity of the two works, since the tinting of Eaux d'Artifice further softens the delicate images of this film and strengthens the contrast with the harsh blacks and whites of Fireworks. With the belated addition of Rabbit's Moon, also tinted blue, to the Anger monochrome canon, this particular dichotomy becomes weaker, since Fireworks and Eaux d'Artifice are now two members of a trio rather than a self-contained dyad. Accordingly, with fatal logic, Anger prepared a blue-tinted print of Fireworks which, unfortunately, was quite murky and vastly inferior to previous versions in clarity and detail. *

This result may be attributed to simple bad luck or taken as an example of the risks an artist takes when he tries to impose too much system on his work. In any case, the incident illustrates the way in which Anger has tried to make his individual works units of larger structures. Anger is certainly correct in perceiving that his three monochrome films naturally belong together, since their style and imagery bind them to one another and keep them distinct from (though with some relation to) the rest of his oeuvre. As I have tried to indicate, the work of the three basic shaping forces defined earlier in this essay is evident in the twenty-year process behind the creation of these three films. (I) The increasing technical and intellectual sophistication of Anger's work, and the evolution of its imagery, reflect the linear progress of his skills and sensibility. (II) The primary "retrospective" element, which makes each film embody a backward look to its prececessor is seen at work in the way (a) Eaux d'Artifice functions as a "mirror image" of Fireworks, and (b) Rabbit's Moon, because of the unusual circumstances behind its creation, reflects both Fireworks and Scorpio Rising in its style. (III) The secondary, architectonic force that creates larger structures has welded all three of these monochrome works into a single cohesive and self-contained unit--Anger's "blue period."

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* This print was destroyed after two showings.

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